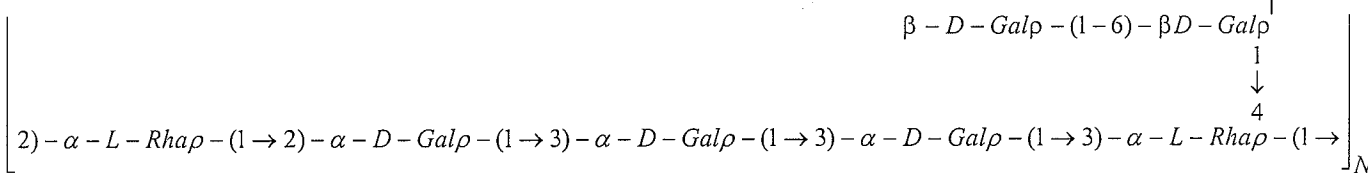


AMENDMENTS TO THE CLAIMS

1. (Currently amended) *Streptococcus thermophilus* ST 111 strain, as deposited on May 29, 2002 under the accession number LMG P-21524 that produces exopolysaccharide which is a polymer of heptasaccharide units, which units have the following structure:



and having a molecular mass of at least 5×10^6 Daltons.

2. (Previously presented) A functional starter culture comprising the exopolysaccharide-producing lactic acid bacterial strain of Claim 1.

3. (Previously presented) A co-culture comprising the exopolysaccharide-producing lactic acid bacterial strain of Claim 1.

4. (Currently amended) A method of producing high-molecular-mass heteropolysaccharides of at least $2-5 \times 10^6$ Daltons during fermentation comprising fermenting the functional starter culture according to claim 2.

5. (Previously presented) A method of fermentation of a food product comprising adding the functional starter culture according to claim 2 to the food product.

6. (Withdrawn – Currently amended) A method for preparing an exopolysaccharide comprising culturing ~~an~~ the exopolysaccharide-producing lactic acid bacterial strain according to Claim 1 in a medium comprising milk and lactalbumin hydrolysate.

7. (Withdrawn) A method according to Claim 6, wherein said medium further comprises at least one additional mono-or disaccharide.

8. (Withdrawn – Currently amended) A method according to Claim 6 characterized in that at least 60 % or 80 % by weight of said exopolysaccharide has a molecular mass of at least 2.5×10^6 Daltons.

9. (Canceled)

10. (Withdrawn) A method according to Claim 7 wherein said monosaccharide is selected from the group consisting of glucose, galactose or fructose.

11. (Withdrawn) A method according to Claim 7 wherein said disaccharide is sucrose.

12. (Withdrawn) A method according to Claim 6 wherein a *Streptococcus thermophilus* ST 111 strain, as deposited on May 29, 2002 under the accession number LMG P-21524, encoding exopolysaccharide production is used.

13. (Cancelled)

14. (Withdrawn) A method for improving the texture of a fermented product comprising adding at the start of or during the fermentation process, a culture of the *Streptococcus thermophilus* ST 111 strain of Claim 1.

15. (Withdrawn) A method for improvement of water retention in a fermented product comprising adding at the start of or during the fermentation process, a culture of *Streptococcus thermophilus* ST 111 strain of Claim 1.

16. (Withdrawn) A method for decreasing syneresis of a fermented product comprising adding at the start of or during the fermentation process, a culture of the *Streptococcus thermophilus* ST 111 strain of Claim 1.

17. (Withdrawn) A method for improvement of water retention during the fermentation process comprising adding at the start of or during the fermentation process, a culture of the *Streptococcus thermophilus* ST 111 strain of Claim 1.

18. (Withdrawn) A method for producing a dairy product comprising adding to the initial dairy product starter culture or adding during the fermentation process, a culture of the *Streptococcus thermophilus* ST 111 strain according to Claim 1.

19. (Currently amended) A method of producing high-molecular-mass heteropolysaccharides of at least $2-5 \times 10^6$ Daltons in food fermentation processes comprising adding a functional starter culture or coculture of the *Streptococcus thermophilus* ST 111 strain according to claim 1 to said food at the start or during the food fermentation process.

20. (Previously presented) The method according to Claim 5 wherein said food product is a dairy product.

21. (Previously presented) The method according to Claim 20 wherein said dairy product is selected from the group consisting of milk products, fermented milk drinks, yoghurts, cheeses, sour cream, whipped toppings, quark and kefir.

22. (Cancelled)

23. (Withdrawn – Currently amended) A dairy product method according to Claim 14, wherein the fermented product is mozzarella cheese ~~22 which is a Mozzarella cheese.~~

24. (Withdrawn) A functional starter culture for the fermentation of a yoghurt comprising a culture of the *Streptococcus thermophilus* ST 111 strain of Claim 1 and a culture of *Lactobacillus delbrueckii subsp. bulgaricus*.

25. (Withdrawn – Currently amended) A method of using a high-molecular-mass exopolysaccharide of at least $2-5 \times 10^6$ Daltons ~~according to Claim 13~~ produced by the method of claim 6 as an additive to a fermented or non-fermented food product.

26-28. (Cancelled)

29. (Previously presented) The method according to Claim 25 wherein said food product is selected from the group consisting of milk products, fermented milk drinks, yoghurts, cheeses, soups, sour cream, whipped toppings, quark, kefir and sauces.

30-31. (Cancelled)

32. (Currently amended) A method of producing high-molecular-mass heteropolysaccharides of at least $2-5 \times 10^6$ Daltons during fermentation comprising fermenting the co-culture according to claim 3.

33. (Previously presented) A method for the fermentation of a food product comprising adding the co-culture according to Claim 3 to the food product.

34. (Previously presented) The method according to Claim 33 wherein said food product is a dairy product.

35. (Previously presented) The method according to Claim 34 wherein said dairy product is selected from the group consisting of milk products, fermented milk drinks, yoghurts, cheeses, sour cream, whipped toppings, quark and kefir.

36. (Cancelled)

37. (Withdrawn – Currently amended) A ~~dairy product~~ method according to Claim 18, wherein the dairy product is a mozzarella cheese ~~36 which is a Mozzarella cheese~~.

38. (Previously presented) A method of fermentation of a yoghurt comprising adding the functional starter culture according to claim 2 to the yoghurt.

39. (Currently amended) A method of fermentation of ~~Mozzarella Cheese~~ mozzarella cheese comprising adding the co-culture according to claim 3 to the ~~Mozzarella Cheese~~ mozzarella cheese.